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ABSTRACT

Asking questions in class can be a routine effort for some students, but many find this particular act to be an extraordinary task. Research demonstrates that at least 15 to 20% of all students suffer from debilitating apprehension when speaking. The number who experience moderate nervousness may be even higher. As a result of not asking questions, students may remain content with ambiguous information; seek clarification from a classmate; approach the instructor after class; or never think in different ways about the phenomenon under discussion. None of the choices fosters effective classroom learning. All things considered, an instructor's behavior plays a large part in determining whether students will open up when they do not understand or when they want more insight. The following four areas form a framework for handling classroom questions supportively: 1) the creation of supportive classroom climates; 2) the importance of listening; 3) confrontational questions and ways of managing them; and 4) additional suggestions and caveats for handling student questions. (RAE)

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Creating Conditions for Student Questions

by

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ABSTRACT

Asking questions in class can be a routine effort for some students, but many find this particular act to be an extraordinary task. Research demonstrates that at least 15 to 20 percent of all students suffer from debilitating apprehension when speaking. The number who experience moderate nervousness may be even higher. As a result of not asking questions, students may: (1) remain content with ambiguous information, (2) seek clarification from a classmate, (3) approach the instructor after class, or (4) never think in different ways about the phenomenon under discussion. None of the choices fosters effective classroom learning. All things considered, an instructor's behavior plays a large part in determining whether students will open up when they do not understand or when they want more insight. This paper will propose a framework for handling classroom questions supportively.

Specifically, I intend to address four areas. First, the creation of supportive classroom climates will be considered. The instructor's language, vocal tones, and nonverbal behaviors play a major role in creating an atmosphere of supportiveness. Under supportive conditions, the student is made to feel that s/he can ask a question and have it answered to his/her satisfaction. The importance of listening will be developed in the second area of the paper. The instructor who rigorously pursues the instructional agenda really may not listen to the questions being asked. Techniques for listening to questions will be presented. The concern of the paper then will turn to confrontative questions and ways of managing them. Finally, the paper will meander into additional suggestions and caveats for handling student questions.

Creating Conditions for Student Questions

"There's no such thing as a dumb question" -- teachers often cite this adage as a way to encourage their students to open up in class. Yet, many of us are often challenged to respond with patience and respect given some of the questions we are asked. Consider, for instance, these questions identified by LaNelle C. Stiles (1986); questions to which we can all relate:

* Student to teacher, upon completing a test: "Do you want these?"

* After an absence, before a test: "Do I have to take this?"

* When the filmstrip or movie projector is being cranked up: "Do we have to take notes on this?"

* At the sight of the first snowflake: "Are we getting out early?"

* When homework is being collected: "When did you assign this?"

* As a preface to asking to be excused from class: "Are we doing anything important today?"

* Following an absence: "Did we do anything yesterday?"

Indeed, to deal with such questions commands much patience and respect!

In a more serious sense, asking questions in class can be a routine effort for some students, but many find this particular act to be an extraordinary task. Research demonstrates that at least 15 to 20 percent of all students suffer from debilitating apprehension when speaking (McCroskey, 1975). The number who experience moderate nervousness may be even higher. As a result of not asking questions, students may: (1) remain content with ambiguous information, (2) seek clarification from a classmate when

information is not clear, (3) approach the instructor after class with questions, or (4) rarely think in different ways about the phenomenon under discussion. None of the choices fosters effective classroom learning. All things considered, an instructor's behavior plays a large part in determining whether students will open up when they do not understand or when they want more insight. This paper will propose a framework for creating conditions for student questions. The framework is grounded in theory, but in keeping with the conference organizer's request that papers be practically-oriented, I will defer theoretical justifications for this proposed framework.

I intend to address four areas. First, the creation of supportive classroom climates will be considered. The instructor's language, vocal tones, and nonverbal sensitivity play a major role in creating an atmosphere of supportiveness. Under supportive conditions, students are made to feel that they can ask a question and have it answered to their satisfaction. The importance of listening will be developed in the second area of the paper. The instructor who rigorously pursues the instructional agenda really may not listen to the questions being asked. Techniques for listening to questions will be considered. The concern of the paper then will turn to confrontative questions students ask and ways of managing these problem events. Finally, the paper will develop additional suggestions and caveats for managing student questions.

Supportive Climates in the Classroom

A supportive classroom climate is one that is characterized by the open and spontaneous exchange of information. An atmosphere is

created where students feel that they can participate and ask questions without being embarrassed, criticized, or looked down upon by the instructor or other students. Perceptions of supportiveness are shaped largely by the instructor's communicative behavior. For instance, when an instructor supportively handles the questions of the more assertive students, the implicit message is: "it's okay to ask a question because it's important that you understand" or " you may have trouble phrasing your question, but I'll try to help you." When students sense supportiveness from the instructor they are more likely to open up. On the other hand, a nonsupportive atmosphere causes people to protect themselves and not take risk for fear of rejection or ridicule. For example, an instructor may severly reprimand students who come to class unprepared or respond insensitively to questions and comments. The over-riding concern in such a classroom is to protect oneself from embarrassment.

Gibb (1961) contends that "(a)s defenses are reduced, the receivers become better able to concentrate upon the structure, the content, and the cognitive meanings of the message." In the absence of ridicule, intimidation, or fear of rejection, spontaneous communication is facilitated. Rosenfeld (1983) found that classes where the teachers showed empathic behavior by communicating understanding of student problems and students' view of the material were less defense-provoking and more liked by the students. Moreover, students seem to be more comfortable in a class where instructors suspend demonstrations of academic arrogance and status is irrelevant (Bowers, et.al., 1986). Simply put, many students are not comfortable with being placed in impersonal/submissive roles, and the instructor's communicative style begins to tell the students

something about the kind of relationship they are to have with their teacher. Supportive messages transform the student-teacher relationship and ultimately, the classroom climate.

Communication (classroom) climate is established by the instructor's language, vocal tones, and nonverbal behavior. Lexical choices and behavior communicate degrees of liking and dominance (Giffin & Patton, 1974). How these relational qualities develop can be seen by the manner in which an instructor introduces himself:

"Good morning, my name is Dr. Walker."

versus

"Hi, I'm Dr. John Walker. But please, call me John."

From these two statements one can see that the same basic content exists, yet the relational implication of the two statements is radically different (Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, 1967). In the first case the student-teacher relationship will <u>likely</u> be formal and somewhat impersonal. The second case suggest that a more informal, personal, and supportive relationship is in the making. Lexical choices, vocal factors, and nonverbal components strongly impact how students perceive the student-teacher relationship. Let us consider these in more detail.

Language that is unfamiliar to the student arouses perceptions of dissimilarity which in turn discourages the student from psychologically and physically approaching the instructor (Berger & Bradac, 1982). Instructors who favor polysyllable words may intimidate many students. I am not arguing that we should abandon a

high form of talk, but too many times a high vocabulary becomes a way of claiming status (Duck, 1986). It is important that we consider the audience we are addressing and their need to be "nurtured" into higher forms of talk.

Also, language which is overly powerful and definative can create defensiveness. For example, Lowman (1984) delineates the subtle difference in a direct, autocratic, style and a more indirect style:

Direct/Autocratic	Indirect
I require...	I would like...
You must...	You will probably want...
I expect...	It is my hope...

Given these examples, it can be argued that subtleties in language shape perceptions of the relationship and the students' desire to approach the instructor. The instructor's phrasing of ideas, opinions, and feelings hints at the degree to which s/he is open and approachable. Consider, as another example, how the instructor's call for questions could influence the students' perception of the relationship:

> "If there are no questions, I would like to move to my next point. . . "
>
> versus
>
> "What questions do you have about topic X?"

Clearly, language becomes a statement about the student-teacher relationship and the expectations it embodies. Of equal importance, however, is the manner in which the language is spoken or vocal delivery. Tone of voice has message-value.

Vocal qualities reinforce, shape, or totally contradict what is

being said verbally. For instance, a listener's interpretation of the statement - "If you need help, let me know." - is influenced by the speaker's vocal delivery. Possible interpretations include:

* I really want to help you. (reinforcement)
* I am busy, and I hope that you won't need help. (shaped)
* An imbecile can do this assignment. (contradiction)

Vocal qualities also have a strong influence on the students' perceptions of the instructor's supportiveness. During a lecture, rapid speech, vigorous back-channeling (i.e., "yeah" and "m-hm") when a student is making a comment or asking a question, and interrupting a student's question strongly shape the climate. These vocal messages are often interpreted as: don't ask questions.

Finally, the instructor's sensitivity to nonverbal behavior communicate degrees of supportiveness. Charles M. Galloway (1979) developed an interesting model for viewing how an instructor's nonverbal manner encourages or restricts student-teacher communication. According to Galloway (1979), teachers who are responsive to their students' nonverbal behaviors and adapt the instruction accordingly are more likely to encourage questions and comments. In other words, do you notice when your students do not understand based on their facial expressions and confused looks? More importantly, do you respond to their confusion or do you continue pursuing your instructional plan? What about your nonverbal manner in the classroom? Are you telling the students that you want them to participate, yet sending a nonverbal message that says otherwise? The instructor's eye contact, facial expressions, body orientation, distance from the student, and

gestures communicate such things as positive feelings toward what is happening in the classroom, attentiveness to the students' concerns, support for what is being asked or said, and whether all students are included in the discussion (Galloway, 1979). It is important that instructors become conscious of the nonverbal messages that they send to students which may either encourage or discourage student questions.

To summarize, the instructor's communicative style will strongly shape the student's perception of supportiveness. To the extent that the instructor communicates approachability, then the students are likely to ask questions and make comments. Eble (1983) argues that among the sins of teaching are arrogance, rigidity, and insensitivity. These qualities are ascribed largely by the way in which the instructor communicates with the class. Verbal, vocal, and nonverbal delivery transform the classroom climate for better or worse. Next, I would like to consider how listening serves to create conditions for student questions.

Listening to Questions

For most people, listening is not an easy thing to do. In the classroom it can be a challenge to listen given the internal concerns of covering the material, classroom disturbances, and other preoccupations. Listening is defined as sensing, interpreting, evaluating, and responding to aural stimuli (Steil, 1981). When applied to student questions, this definition suggests that the instructor would hear the question, understand the nature of the question being asked, judge what it is the student is needing to know, and then respond appropriately. But when a student raises a question there are a number of barriers to listening and responding

to the question effectively.

One problem of listening to questions is the ineffective use of the thought/speech differential. Most people speak at a rate of 200-250 words per minute. The mind can process words at 400-500 per minute. Instead of using the spare time to fully interpret what the student is asking, the instructor may use the time to:

* prepare his/her response to the question
* think about how the particular question is "wasting valuable class time"
* think about the next item on the instructional agenda
* think about the student's positive or negative qualities
* mentally criticize the student's inability to phrase the question
* focus on internal concerns
* become distracted by other things going on in the classroom

The point is that the spare time is not being used to process the contents of the questions and fully understand what is being asked by the student.

Another listening problem revolves around the listener's self-consciousness. Teachers typically are use to having control in the classroom. When a question is asked, however, control is relinquished to some degree. It is not easy to predict where the question might lead. As a result, some instructors feel intimidated by questions and comments for fear that they could lead to "uncharted" areas or an answer will not be readily available. Such preoccupation would make listening to the question difficult.

A final barrier to listening to student questions is emotional

triggers. Certain words, topics, and/or students might can be an emotional trigger for the instructor. Consider how the following questions could raise your ire:

* You said . . .
* Why do we have to do this?
* I'm lost. How does this relate to . . .?

There are countless words, topics, and students which can elicit an emotional response from the instructor. Responding emotionally will hinder one's ability to listen, even though there may be no outward demonstration of the emotion.

So what does it take to listen effectively to what the students are asking and saying? First, listening to student questions means that you mentally and physically focus attention on the student asking the question (sensing). Such focusing not only helps you to concentrate on the student, but it encourages the student to continue. Nearly everyone appreciates being listened to; and they are more likely to talk when they feel that the talk will be heard. Concentration means that you will effectively monitor the classroom to control distractions which interfere with your ability to listen. Moreover, you have to view questions as a learning opportunity rather than a nuisance or a threat to your competence.

Second, listen to what is not being asked. Some questions are nothing more than a disguised feeling or comment. For example the question -- "Do we have to know all of this for the test?" -- could really mean, "I feel overwhelmed." The manner in which the question is asked (e.g., tone of voice and hesitations) is often a cue that there is something more than the question itself. Being sensitive

and responding to the motive/feeling behind the question could do much to encourage future questions and comments. This assumes, of course, that such probing would not require the student to talk about deeply personal motives and feelings. A personal conference may be in order when you suspect something deeply personal is going on with the student.

Finally, emotions have to be monitored if we want to be successful in our listening. Emotions are a perfectly human response to life, but too many times they lead to dysfunctional responses. Get in touch with your emotional triggers. What kinds of questions really bother you? Which students do you just really dislike? (We all have them.) It is important that you get in touch with these triggers and examine your feelings. Only then can more productive listening come about.

Listening effectively to the questions as they are being asked will help to build a climate for additional student questions. Also, responses will be more satisfying when they have been directed to the question that was really asked and not a question that the instructor assumed was asked. It is generally a good idea to check with the student to make sure his/her question was answered. The concern of this paper will now shift to confrontative questions that emerge in the classroom.

Confrontative Questions

It truly would be wonderful to have only students who were eager to learn; students who asked meaningful questions; and students who demonstrated no malice toward the instructor. But life, learning, and students are not so easy! Inevitably,

instructors will face highly problematic situations and confrontative questions that can transform the classroom climate. The method of managing these challenges will make a difference. Some of these problem encounters stem from the nature of students.

R.D. Mann and his colleagues have posed an interesting typology of student roles (cited in Lowman, 1984). Of the eight types of student roles that Mann identifies, there are two which are most relevant to this discussion: anxious-dependents and snipers. The anxious-dependent student is concerned greatly about grades. This student has a real fear of not getting the material and moreover, he has some distrust of the instructor. Anxious-dependents will ask for information to be repeated to make sure s/he is getting it correctly, and raise cynical questions about the instructor's intent for presenting certain material. Let us say, as an example, that a psychology instructor has just presented a vibrant lecture on, "Ten Ways to Establish a Confirming Relationship," and she calls for questions. The anxious-dependent will most likely be the first to ask the following question: "Will we have to know this for the test?" The instructor's response will greatly influence what happens thereafter.

The anxious-dependent needs assurance before being encouraged to levels of independence. This is a student who is intimidated and plagued by self-doubts. As an instructor, your behavior will either validate the student's distrust or begin to change how the student feels (Lowman, 1984). When the anxious-dependent student's question revolves around content it is important that s/he receives a straight response that carries no emotional overtones of frustration or anger with the question. Also, writing on the chalkboard your responses

to these questions will help to reinforce what you are saying. When your intentions are questioned this presents quite a different challenge, but it can be managed supportively. For instance, an anxious-dependent student might ask: "Why do you give lectures that do not follow what is in the textbook?" Acknowledging the merit of the question (and it is a meritorious question) and then proceeding to explain your instructional approach and how the student might adjust to it can reduce levels of apprehension and in the process, establish a more positive classroom climate. To respond, "Because that's my style, why?" could be dysfunctional for all concerned.

The sniper can be much like the anxious-dependent in communicative style, but his motives are different. A hostile nature is manifested in the classroom through cynicism and cutting remarks (Lowman, 1984). Perhaps more than anything else, it is important to recognize the merit in questions asked by the sniper and to ignore the hostility.

Yet what happens when students raise a legitimate confrontative question that is not based out of a anxious-dependent or sniper role? Hocker (1986) poses that the teacher must achieve a collaborative style of managing the conflict rather than a competitive style if all are to be satisfied. Hocker (1986) makes the following observation about competitive strategies for managing student concerns:

> Tactics guaranteed to drive a particular conflict underground instead of dealing with it openly would be teacher comments such as, "That's just the way life is," "Too bad," "Let me tell you what you should do," "This is a bad class," and other insensitive assertions. p.78

Instead, the instructor should strive for more collaborative tactics

such as:

1. DESCRIPTION. "You sound frustrated with the amount of material we covered today," not "My earlier class had no problem with this."

2. DISCLOSURE. "I remember I had trouble with theoretical models as a student. Let's see where I lost you guys," not "You'll understand it better after you read the chapter."

3. NEGATIVE INQUIRY (SOLICITING COMPLAINTS ABOUT SELF). "How do I come across as overly opinionated? I'd like to know more of what you mean?" not "I've been teaching for 20 years I'm bound to have strong opinions about the material.

4. EMPHASIZING COMMON INTEREST. "I'm not here to make your lives miserable. I want you to succeed too. Let's see where the misunderstanding happened," not "This is college. I'm not responsible for your study habits."

(Hocker, 1986)

These collaborative strategies are more likely to move the confrontation to a productive level which will serve to produce a solution to the immediate problem and enhance the relationship. As mentioned earlier, students often feel uncomfortable and defensive in a win-lose relationship.

Additional Suggestions and Caveats

In this section, I would like to develop additional considerations for the management of student questions.

1. Do not go for more than 15 minutes without calling for questions. Many instructors wait until after a long lecture or a great deal of information has been related before they call for questions. Students may have either forgotten their questions or they are so overloaded with information that they do not know where to begin.

2. Pause after calling for questions. Students need time to think about what they want to ask. Too many times, because of the

discomfort which accompanies long silences, instructors do not leave sufficient time for students to think.

3. Do not call for questions just minutes before a scheduled break or dismissal. We are all aware of the implicit group norm that dictates that questions should not be asked if they will cause the class to stay past the scheduled break.

4. Take great care in the way you ask for questions. As mentioned earlier, the tone of voice has message value and as a result, a message might come across in your tone that you really do not want questions asked.

5. Take great care in your response to the first question asked. This first exchange can set the tone for what begins to happen thereafter. Whether you are in a good/friendly mood or bad/unfriendly mood will come across in this initial exchange.

6. Do not be afraid to say you do not know. Some instructors fear being put into this position. It is nice to fantasize that one knows everything but that, of course, is impossible. But do make an effort to find an answer and get back to the student.

7. Look for and acknowledge the merit in questions. Students have taken a great risk to ask the questions. It helps if there is some sort of acknowledgment for this risk.

8. Create a question box. This can be particularly helpful in the early stages of the semester. Working with these questions as you begin or end each class period can begin to motivate students to risk asking questions more directly.

Conclusion

This paper has considered the type of classroom climate that is

established for student questions. Much of the climate is determined by the instructor's communicative style, listening behavior, and method of handling confrontative questions. Questions are never guaranteed. Such factors as shyness, cultural upbringing, and confusion with the material will determine the motivation to ask questions. Nevertheless, a supportive classroom climate increases the likelihood of student participation than would otherwise be expected.

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